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ABSTRACT

This one-act playlet illustrates the profound impact Latin has on English. A dispute over the significance of Latin involves nine characters, each of whom contribute an etymological analysis of a Latin-derived English word which is considered a spelling problem or is a specialized word used in other subject areas. (RL)

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HOW LATIN HELPS IN OTHER SUBJECTS: A PLAYLET IN ONE ACT

By E. Christine Davis

(Enter BELL, KRAVIF, MANNING and HORVITZ)

BELL: Well, school's over for another day. Gee! And am I glad! Where are you going now? Let's go to the movies or do something exciting!

HORVITZ: That would be great. But I don't know. With all the work we've got to do -- book report in physics, history, and all the rest. They're surely loading us down. What do those teachers think we are anyway? Bet they didn't have to study so hard.

BELL: You're right. And not to mention math, English, and Latin. Especially Latin. What good do you get out of that? Answer me that one! That dead and gone language! All that hard work for nothing.

MANNING: Well, you're wrong there. Trouble is you don't connect it with other subjects.

BELL: Well, tell me how.

MANNING: All right. For instance, in the test in English the other day you said you got a low mark -- mostly mistakes in spelling. What were some of them?

BELL: Oh, as usual I misspelled "separate," "committee," "annual," and "dissension." I just cannot spell. Don't you think you have to be born a good speller?

KRAVIF: Well, maybe! But if you would just remember your Latin words, spelling would become much easier. "Separate" comes from Latin paro spelled with an "a." "Annual" comes from Latin annus and a double "n."

(Enter DRISCOLL, MURPHY and SOORKIS)

MANNING: And "committee" must have a double "m" and double "t" because it is made up of com and mitto, "to send together" and "dissension" is from dis, "apart" and sentio, "to think." So it has a double "s".

MURPHY: Hello, everybody! What is the discussion?

HORVITZ: Well, we were discussing whether Latin is really a worthwhile subject to study. Everyone agrees it isn't easy.

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DRISCOLL: The other day in English we came across these lines from The Merchant of Venice:

"Let me play the fool.
With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come:
And let my liver rather heat with wine
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans."

At first no one in the class could understand "mortifying groans," because usually "mortifying" means "embarrassing." But all at once I thought of mor, mortis, "death," so we worked out the meaning "death-bringing groans."

SOORKIS: Yes, and that poem "Lady of the Lake," is divided into cantos. Cantus in Latin means a "song" or "poem."

BELL: Say, this is getting interesting. By the way, who was this fellow Ibid?

KRAVIF: Ibid? Never heard of him.

BELL: He must be a poet. I had to find a poem to learn for public speaking. I found a good one in a collection of poems. It was written by Ibid. So it said at the end.

KRAVIF: That's a good one! "Ibid." is an abbreviation for Latin ibidem which means "in the same place." In this case it means "by the same author."

HORVITZ: Well, I'm glad to know that.

MURPHY: We sophomores see a lot of Latin in geometry. "Bisect" means "cut in two," "tangent" means "a line touching another." And you can't help knowing what "equilateral" means if you know the Latin aequus, "equal," and latus, "side."

SOORKIS: Yes, and the decimal system is so named from Latin decimus meaning "tenth."

(Enter COTTRELL and CARACA)

COTTRELL: Look who's here! Must be something exciting! Did I hear someone say "Latin?"

MURPHY: Yes, these upperclassmen were talking about the value of Latin, so I stopped to tell what I knew about it.

COTTRELL: Sure! Here's an example. In biology we had "poriferous" sponges. It's easy to see that it means "hole-bearing" sponges, from the Latin porus, meaning "an opening" or "hole," and fero "to bear."

CARACA: Yes, and in geometry "concurrent lines" mean "lines coming together" or "meeting."

HORVITZ: Physics and chemistry are full of Latin words.

BELL: Yes, even I can remember some. "Inertia" means "lack of activity." We have had that word this year in Cicero.

HORVITZ: And "capillary" action means "hair-like," from capilli, "hairs."

KRAVIF: And "gravity" comes from gravis, "heavy."

HORVITZ: All the symbols in chemistry are from Latin words. Fe, for ferrum, "iron," Ag, for argentum, "silver," Pb, for plumbum, "lead," Au, for aurum, "gold."

BELL: And Carlyle's "Essay on Burns," is full of Latin quotations. Here's one: "As for Burns," writes Carlyle, "I may briefly say Virgilium vidi tantum." It means "As for Vergil, I merely caught a glimpse of him."

KRAVIF: Here's some more "English" borrowed from the Latin. In one of Galsworthy's plays he says: "Honesty is the sine qua non." It means "honesty is indispensable;" literally, "without which not."

CARACA: Our Latin teacher talks a lot about gerunds and gerundives. Here are some, put right into English or only slightly changed. "Memorandum," means "something to be recalled;" "addenda," "things to be added;" "minuend," "something to be diminished;" "subtrahend," "something to be taken away;" "dividend," "something to be divided."

KRAVIF: Many English words are derived from Latin, with interesting stories connected with them. "Nasturtium" means a "nose-twister" from nasum, "nose," and torqueo, "to twist." "Rivals" were people who liven "on opposite banks of a river" (rivus, "river"), and both wanted the water. "Bonus" literally means "good" or "something to the good;" as the soldiers' "bonus." Sinister in Latin means "on the left side;" Hence, "unlucky." The present meaning of English "sinister" has the idea of "evil" or "threatening."

DRISCOLL: All words ending in "-fy" mean "to make:" e.g., "clarify," "to make clear;" also "satisfy," "magnify," "intensify." And the suffix "-fy" comes ultimately from Latin facere, "to make."

COTTRELL: The hard part of Latin is Latin composition. You have to change everything all over sometimes. Why didn't they use common sense and say what they meant?

MANNING: Well, the trouble is we don't say what we mean. For instance, "Without more remarks, he took his departure." Did he go without anything? Did he take anything? Yet it is good English.

KRAVIF: The Romans would simply say something like this. "Having said nothing, he departed." (Nihil locutus discessit.)

COTTRELL: And our English word "about" is used in three different ways:

I'll tell you about the game.
He walked about the house.
There were about twenty people present.

The Romans had a word for each of these three ideas:

The preposition "about" meaning "concerning;" the preposition "about," meaning "around;" and the adverb "about;" so you have to think what the English means before you can write it in Latin.

HORVITZ: We hear a lot about status quo these days. I know the translation is "the condition in which." But what does it really mean?

MANNING: I think it means "the existing condition."

SOORKIS: There is another Latin expression often used in English, per se. It means "by itself."

KRAVIF: This is a big subject we have started. We have scarcely touched upon the prefixes, suffixes, and Latin roots. For example, greg- is a Latin stem meaning "herd." Hence, "gregarious," "segregate," "congregation." "Egregious" means "out of the herd," that is, "extraordinary."

MANNING: And the suffix -sco means "to become," "to begin;" e.g., "incandescent," "beginning to glow;" "irridescent," "beginning to change color." Iris was the goddess of the rainbow, you know.

HORVITZ (looking at the clock): Gee, whiz! See what time it is. I'd better be going along.

BELL: I'm rather glad I know some Latin after all.

SOORKIS: It is a good thing for us sophomores to hear how it helps when you get to be juniors and seniors.

ALL: That's right. Well, so long until tomorrow.